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## **How Goal Distance Influences Regulatory Focus in Goal Pursuit**

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This research demonstrates that large (vs. small) goal distance leads to a promotion (vs. prevention) focused representation of a goal. The underline mechanism is the change in reference points which produces a switch from a “gain frame” to a “loss frame” of mind as progress toward the goal is made.

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# How Goal Distance Influences Regulatory Focus in Goal Pursuit

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This research examines the influence of goal distance on the regulatory focus of goals. Individuals can construe goals as hopes, aspirations and ideals (promotion-focused goals) or as responsibilities, duties and obligations (prevention-focused goals) (Higgins 1997). Previous research identified individual (e.g., Higgins 1997; Aaker and Lee 2001; Cesario, Grant, and Higgins 2004), goal specific (e.g., Lee and Aaker 2004; Chitturi, Raghunathan, and Mahajan 2008) or situational characteristics (e.g., Mogilner, Aaker, and Pennington 2008) which can influence the regulatory focus of a goal. What remains to be seen is whether the regulatory focus of a goal can change as progress toward the goal is made. Here we demonstrate that goal distance can influence regulatory focus of a goal. We also demonstrate that goal distance is not temporal distance or, more broadly, psychological distance.

In earlier stages of goal pursuit, individuals rely on their initial state as a reference point (Bonezzi, Brendl, and DeAngelis 2011) which makes goal attainment/failure represent a gain/non-gain situation. Goal attainment is a positive deviation from the starting state as a reference point and, hence, it is a gain, while goal failure is a non-deviation from the starting state as a reference point and, hence, it is a non-gain; such representation construes a promotion goal (Higgins 1997, 2002; Shah et al. 1998). In later stages of goal pursuit, individuals rely on their desired end state as a reference point (Bonezzi et al. 2011) which makes goal attainment/failure represent a non-loss/loss situation. If a goal is attained it is a non-deviation from the desired state as a reference point and, hence, a non-loss, while goal failure is a negative deviation from the desired state as a reference point and, hence, a loss; such representation construes a prevention goal (Higgins 1997, 2002; Shah et al. 1998).

The goal distance construct involves two factors: assessment of the gap between the current and the desired state and the appreciation of actions necessary for goal attainment (Townsend and Liu 2012). The actual discrepancy between the current and the desired state is positively correlated with the actual amount of time to goal attainment and, hence, is positively correlated with temporal distance. Assessment of the actions necessary to reduce the “gap” draws attention to the difficulty associated with goal attainment (Townsend and Liu 2012); and, since perception of difficulty has been shown to reduce temporal construal (Vallacher and Wegner 1987; Thomas and Tsai 2012), it reduces temporal distance by constraining time resources. Hence, the two factors in the goal distance construct produce pressures on temporal distance which work in opposing directions.

For temporally unfocused goals, where the point in time of goal attainment or failure is not discretely specified (Madey and Gilovich 1993), goal distance influences both actual time to goal attainment and the amount of effort necessary to reach the goal. Therefore, for temporally *unfocused* goals, goal distance will likely leave the subjective experience of temporal distancing unaffected. Greater goal distance will increase actual time to goal attainment, thus putting upward pressure on temporal distance, but it will also increase the perception of difficulty associated with greater effort necessary for goal attainment, thus putting downward pressure on temporal distance. For temporally *focused* goals (Madey and Gilovich 1993), actual time to goal attainment/failure is fixed by some external factor (e.g., date of the driving test, deadline for the assignment, etc.). Hence, for temporally focused goals, goal distance will *not* influence actual time

to goal attainment, but it will emphasize difficulty and make time seem less abundant. The more progress a person makes toward their goal, the more abundant any amount of time to goal attainment/failure will feel. Therefore, for temporally focused goals, goal distance and temporal distance will be negatively correlated.

In study 1, participants were asked to imagine that they passed one (large goal distance) or three (small goal distance) out of the four interview stages necessary to get a job. They were then asked to match promotion or prevention phrases to describe their goal. They were also asked to indicate to what extent getting the job represents a gain versus not getting the job represents a loss. Participants in the large goal distance condition reported being more in the gain frame of mind and matched more promotion phrases, while participants in the small goal distance condition reported being more in the loss frame of mind and matched more prevention phrases to describe their goal. In study 2 participants imagined having set a weight loss goal (15 pounds) and having made little (5 pounds) or substantial (10 pounds) goal progress. Participants then read a promotion or prevention framed advertisement for a fitness program. Large goal distance participants reported more favorable attitude and greater purchase intentions after reading a promotion (vs. prevention) focused advertisement; and the reverse was true for small goal distance participants. In study 3, to demonstrate process, all participants were asked to imagine being half way through goal pursuit (having raised \$250 out of \$500) for a charity. We manipulated reference points by framing goal progress in terms of “to date” or “to go” to manipulate the beginning or the desired state as a reference point (Koo & Fishbach, 2008). “To date” framing produced greater focus on positive (vs. negative) outcomes and a more gain (vs. loss) frame of mind compared to “to go” framing. In study 4, participants imagined having made little (vs. substantial) progress toward a weight loss goal. Large goal distance participants reported that their goal was more of a maximal goal, while small goal distance participants reported that their goal was more of a minimal goal. Temporal distance and construal level indicators were not affected. In study 5, participants imagined having covered 2 or 8 out of the 10 chapters necessary for an exam (temporally focused goal). Large (vs. small) goal distance participants described their goal as more promotion (vs. prevention) focused. Importantly, large goal distance participants imagined the exam to be closer in time and thought about it more concretely compared to large goal distance participants.

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